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Tulloch, Marian; Judd, Madelaine-Marie; Naidu, Vishendran; Kinash, Shelley; Fleming, Julie; Nair, Chenicheri Sid; Santhanam, Elizabeth; Tucker, Beatrice

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Case studies to enhance online student evaluation: Charles Sturt University – Evaluation, analytics and systems integration

Marian Tulloch
Charles Sturt University

Madelaine Judd
Bond University, madelaine_001@hotmail.com


Vishen Naidu
Bond University, Vishen_Naidu@bond.edu.au

Shelley Kinash
Bond University, shelley.kinash@gmail.com

Julie Fleming
Central Queensland University

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Marian Tulloch, Madelaine Judd, Vishen Naidu, Shelley Kinash, Julie Fleming, Sid Nair, Elizabeth Santhanam, and Beatrice Tucker



Case studies to enhance student evaluation

2015 Charles Sturt University:
Evaluation, analytics and systems integration

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Office for Learning and Teaching
Department of Education and Training

GPO Box 9880,
Location code N255EL10
Sydney NSW 2001

<learningandteaching@education.gov.au>

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Introduction

Feedback from students is an essential element in improving the quality of courses (programs) and their component subjects (units). Educators may use a range of informal conversational or ad hoc survey methods (e.g. Harvard one-minute papers) to gain just-in-time feedback from students. These ad hoc surveys enable educators to respond to issues during the subject. Formal end-of-session evaluations, however, are now firmly embedded in university practice. They not only provide student feedback on the complete subject, but also provide accountability at the subject, school, faculty and whole-of-institution level with a capability to monitor trends over time.

Charles Sturt University (CSU) moved from a paper-based to an online evaluation system in 2005. A major driver for this shift was the large number of distance education students, totalling over 23,000. Surveying these students involved a cumbersome process of mail-out and return of surveys with very poor response rates. An online system also enabled rapid processing of responses. As soon as the student submission window closed, results were released online to relevant staff, including Heads of School, rather than waiting weeks and providing feedback when staff members were immersed in their next session's teaching. From the inception of the online evaluation system, CSU not only sent direct messages to students regarding the opening of the evaluation window, but also presented the system as a tool in the online subject dashboard, a strategy identified as important to embedding evaluation within the learning and teaching culture (Reed et al, 2012).

A review of the student evaluation system and survey was conducted in 2010 and some key issues emerged:

- a) the existing survey questions were quite generic and did not easily translate into actionable data
- b) survey items designed for standard subjects were not suitable for gaining feedback on a significant number of workplace learning subjects (practicum placements) that form an integral part of many courses at CSU
- c) to support curriculum renewal, information was needed by course directors and course teams on how students perceived the inter-relation of each subject to the course as a whole
- d) to enhance response rates and align with the University's mobile strategy, students need ready mobile access to the evaluation system
- e) students need feedback on how cohorts responded to subjects and how the university is using this information to improve support for student learning.

To facilitate these goals, CSU adopted and integrated a new evaluation system that has mobile functionality and allows for alternative survey instruments for standard and workplace learning cohorts. Data export to CSU's central data warehouse was also enabled to provide linkage to additional information (e.g. subject-course linkages).

Subject Experience Survey design

In the re-design of the student evaluation survey, items were designed to focus on the presence of factors identified by research as enabling students to learn effectively, thus avoiding the problems involved with satisfaction measures (Richardson, 2005). Items were designed to be equally meaningful to students whether they were studying on campus or at a distance, face-to-face or online. The focus of the survey was student's experience of a subject recognising that with increasing frequency, the design and the teaching of subjects often involves multiple staff members and, particularly at the design stage, professional as well as academic staff. For these reasons the survey was named the Subject Experience Survey (SES). The SES provides data that pinpoints specific aspects of the educational design and teaching process that represent effective practice or need improvement (Law, 2010).

The survey was trialled with over 1,000 student volunteers participating across 113 subjects. This provided a quantitative data set for analysis of reliability and construct validity. Students were able to add comments to each item. While some students elaborated on their response, others commented on the individual item wording and raised issues of clarity. Follow-up phone interviews provided more detailed insight into student perspectives. This process involved a significant engagement of students with the survey development process, rather than relying only on feedback from academic staff members.

The design of the workplace-learning version of the survey paralleled the standard survey quite closely but shifted the context by using terms such as *professional knowledge* and *professional practice*. A few items that related specifically to workplace-learning provided these students a feedback process with which they could engage meaningfully. An additional benefit of differentiating this set of subjects was that it was possible to adjust the window for post-subject evaluation to recognise that workplace-learning often took place outside standard session times. Academics reported that closure at standard times produced very poor response rates that limited useful feedback and excluded many students from the chance to respond. The outcome of these changes is that, in a key strategic area for the university, CSU now has meaningful data about its workplace-learning subjects, enabling specific exemplars of effective practice and areas of concern to be identified.

Accessibility

The provision of simple and easy access to student evaluations via a mobile app was an important enhancement of the new student evaluation system. It provides students with an opportunity to complete evaluations anywhere at any time, for instance in a lecture theatre, at the end of class, or on public transport. A comprehensive communication campaign alerted students to the new feature with the broader context of why we needed their feedback and survey changes that accompanied it. In the first session of offering of a mobile app, twenty per cent of responses were received via the mobile app accompanied by an increase in overall response rates. This indicates that mobile access to student evaluations provides a new response option that is valued by a significant number of students. As CSU enhances the functionality of its mobile learning and teaching environment, it is hoped that even more students will engage with this option.

Systems integration and alignment

For student feedback to be useful it needs to be available as rapidly as possible to a variety of stakeholders. Prior to this latest innovation, while subject data was made available to subject coordinators and Heads of School in a timely fashion, aggregation of data for institutional purposes was conducted through annual reporting and therefore extremely lagged. One aim of the project was to enable integration of evaluation data with other university databases to get more holistic and powerful reporting features. An early instance of the value of this functionality was the ability to extract across the university the feedback on assessment items to support the work of a committee monitoring the implementation of new assessment and moderation policies. Easy access to timely data is essential for institutional responsiveness.

An important initiative arising from enhanced systems integration was the creation of a student portal to enable students to examine results of student feedback on any subject of interest. Because of the sensitivity of academic staff around such reporting, there was careful consultation on the most meaningful way to present this data. Academics were understandably concerned that students may create simplistic comparisons based on an aggregate subject mean or derived from a very small sample of respondents. The student portal was therefore designed to present students with detailed quantitative feedback on an item-by-item basis for a particular subject cohort. This presents students with a clear picture of how they, or their peers, viewed specific aspects of the subject but does not encourage subject ranking. Early evidence indicates many students are exploring subject data as it indicates that CSU is serious about improving quality.

The online subject outlines provide a space for subject coordinators to update students as to how subjects have been modified in response to student feedback. Further work is needed to ensure that all staff are making responsive changes and providing feedback.

A further aspect of systems integration is the provision of subject data to course directors and their course teams as part of the curriculum renewal processes. The systems integration and reporting processes for this task are still under development. As Figure one highlights, there are five key strategies relating to student evaluation that have successfully been implemented at CSU.

Figure one: Key strategies implemented at CSU

Accessibility	Provision of a mobile app provides an additional user-friendly means of survey access and an increase in response rates.
Survey Design	Alignment of survey with key aspects of student learning provides academics with actionable feedback.
Alignment	Ensuring that distinctive subject types (e.g. workplace learning) have appropriate surveys items enables meaningful student feedback and provides useful institutional data.
Systems integration	More holistic and powerful reporting processes derived from systems integration provides timely, accessible reporting for students and supports continuous quality improvement of courses and subjects.
Feedback loop	Design of student portal which includes reports from all subject student evaluations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, effective student evaluation systems and processes need to meet the needs of various stakeholders. Students need a system that is easy to access on multiple platforms. They want feedback on how subjects are evaluated and most critically how that data is used to improve quality of subjects and courses. Academic staff members need feedback that they can act on both individually and in course teams. The institution requires timely data that aligns with institutional priorities and strategies.

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